

The Prom Queen of Soul

Whitney Houston is sleek, sexy, successful — and, surprise, she can sing

There she stands, Miss Black America. With her impeccable face, sleek figure and supernova smile, she looks like a Cosby kid made in heaven. She stirs sentiments not of lust but of protectiveness and awe; everybody around wants to adopt her, escort her or be her. And now this perfect creature picks up a microphone. Oh. You mean she sings too?

Oh, yes. Whitney Houston can sing, and not just too. Beneath the Tiffany wrapping lie the supplest pipes in pop music. Her precocity and virtuosity, her three-octave range and lyrical authority, are, at 23, scary. She can switch moods without stripping emotional gears, segueing from a raunchy growl to an angelic trill in a single line—no sweat. She coaxes the back-street torch song *Saving All My Love for You* until the song's Other Woman sounds like a little girl lost in faded rapture. She stands up to the string section in that anthem of enlightened egotism, *Greatest Love of All*, finding the prettiest weave of velvet and voltage. Then the synthesized percussion starts blasting, and she escalates into purring teen ecstasy for *How Will I Know* and her new hit *I Wanna Dance with Somebody (Who Loves Me)*. This is infectious, can't-sit-down music, and her performance dares the listener not to smile right back.

Just about everybody has bought the smile and the sound. *Whitney Houston*, her first album, has sold more than 13 million copies worldwide to become the best-selling debut in history, garnering the singer a Grammy and seven American Music Awards. And now, as she kicks off a summer-long tour of 45 concerts, she has done it again. Her new collection, *Whitney*, made pop-music history as the first album by a female singer to debut at No. 1 on *Billboard's* pop chart. The album's first single, *I Wanna Dance with Somebody*, scampered to the top of eight different *Billboard* hit lists, from Adult Contemporary to Crossover and from West Germany to Australia. Her "birth-to-death demographics" attract nearly every music listener and a few who just watch. "She can get the kids on the dance floor," says Narada Michael Walden, who produced *I Wanna Dance* and six other cuts on her new album, "then turn around and reach your grandmother."

Grandma better get ready to boogie. From the very first cascading

wooooo! on *I Wanna Dance*, the new album showcases a Whitney Houston who sings bolder, blacker, badder. This Whitney doesn't just want to dance with somebody, she wants "to feel the heat with somebody," and the vocal scorches. The rest of the album—a mixture of party songs and love songs—displays its star's subtler readings, greater vocal nuance, more dynamism and control. On the jazzy ballad *Just the Lonely Talking*, she eases into an adventurous scat duet with an alto sax. But she can still sing it straight and sweet, as in

Michael Masser's romantic elegy *Didn't We Almost Have It All*, an instant standard with a spiraling melodic line.

Whitney's most meaningful cut has to be *I Know Him So Well*, a power-pop ballad from the Broadway-bound musical *Chess*, which she sings with her mother Cissy. In the song, a grandmaster's wife and mistress muse about being unable to fulfill his needs for fantasy and security; in this version, mother and daughter sing about a husband-father, and it makes for an electrifying duet. Throughout the al-



The singer revs up, insert, and lies down

bum, the range and vocal glamour displayed offer testimony that Cissy's girl has grown up. *Whitney* marks graduation day for the prom queen of soul.

Houston's triumph is all the more impressive for the odds it bucked. Two years ago, she was an unknown, a background vocalist in a cheerleader's body. Moreover, of her first album's ten cuts, six were ballads. This chanteuse had to fight for air play with hard rockers. The young lady had to stand uncowed in the locker room of macho rock. The soul strutter had to seduce a music audience that anointed few black artists with superstardom.

Houston was no trailblazer. She was a phenomenon waiting to happen, a canny tapping of the listener's yen for a return to the musical middle. And because every new star creates her own genre, her success has helped other blacks, other women, other smooth singers find an avid reception in the pop marketplace. As Whitney, her own most dispassionate appraiser, told *TIME* Correspondent Elaine Dutka, "Here I come with the right skin, the right voice,

the right style, the right everything. A little girl makes the crossover and *VOOOM!* it's a little easier for the others."

Her pedigree may have made it a little easier for her. As Walden notes, "Whitney comes from vocal royalty." Cissy Houston has been a fixture in gospel and pop for three decades. Dionne Warwick, who crafted a unique pop style before Whitney was born, is her cousin. Aretha Franklin, the first woman inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, is known as "Auntie Ree" around the Houston home. Clive Davis, the industry swami who revived Dionne's and Aretha's fortunes when he signed them for his Arista Records, spent two years preparing each of Whitney's albums.

To her admirers, Houston's success represents an overdue vindication of that neglected American institution, the black middle class. Here is a morality play with a happy ending: two strong, affectionate parents nurturing their talented daughter toward the show-biz dream of fame without

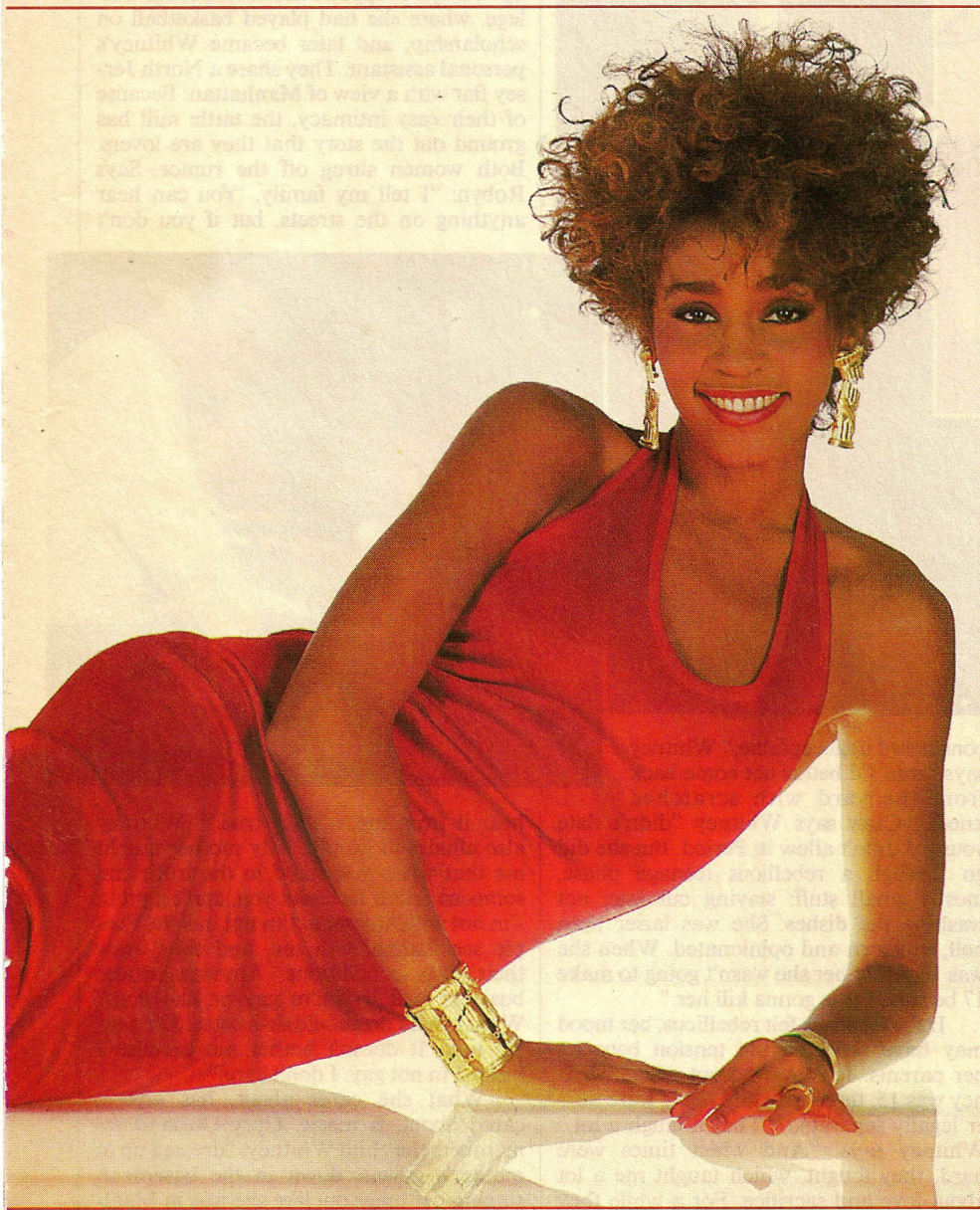
pain. To scoffers in the rock critical Establishment, though, the 5-ft. 8-in., 115-lb. beauty is a black Barbie doll. To them, Whitney's voice, so willing to roam through the breadth of pop music, shows no emotional depth; they find the selection of her songs bland and timid.

So what is this—Whitney bread? The latest, most lavish confection of a no-risk music industry? Not quite. It's true that being gorgeous hasn't hurt her; those videos show a natural performer in the lightning radiance of youth. But if the camera loves her, so does the microphone. With that voice she could look like Danny DeVito and still be a star. It's true as well that she has been sold smartly and aggressively. But these salesmen had a Mercedes to peddle. As the singer says of herself, "They didn't have to make me over. There would be no 'Whitney Houston' without Whitney Houston." All of which raises the musical questions: Where did she come from? What did she overcome? For that we need a brief course in cultural history. This one:

In the beginning there was rock *and* roll. The infant art form embraced gospel and country, blues and ballads. Blacks cohabited with whites on the Top 40; boys packing sexual threat in their jeans shared the bill with girls tenderized in lacquer and lace. The mood could be tender too. On the radio, a slow tune just naturally followed an up-tempo number; it was the heartbeat of teen America. The 19-year-old Aretha Franklin could take a Broadway spiritual like Meredith Willson's *Are You Sure* and transform it into a righteous steeple raiser. Baby, that was rock *and* roll.

Auntie Ree emerged in the early '60s as part of an impressive sorority—soul sisters from all over. Cousin Dionne, working within the ricochet rhythms of Burt Bacharach's songs, built a brand-new bridge connecting gospel urgency to show-tune sophistication. Barbra Streisand moonlighted from Broadway and never went back. The jazz inflections of Nina Simone and Sarah Vaughan enriched the vocabulary of pop. The megaton voices of Jackie DeShannon, Dusty Springfield and Timi Yuro lent powerful shadings to love songs. And the girl groups—all the -elles and -ettes, the Supremes and Shangri-Las—kept teen pulses surging to an irresistible beat. It made for a varied, vigorous music, in the golden age of chanteuse pop.

By the early '70s, though, a new agenda had been proclaimed. Melody and vocal craft were out, to be replaced by the hip virtues of energy and attitude. Male singer-songwriters were now the Rimbauds of rock and the women merely interpreters, trimming their expertise to the cut of the material. LaBelle or Bette Midler could coax a ballad to tears or go all raw in a rave-up, but that wasn't artistry, only dexterity without the signature of commitment. Meanwhile, FM radio's narrow-cast formats were herding black artists into the chic ghettos of Las Vegas and the R.-and-B. stations. By now the first generation of rock-'n'-roll kids had hit their 30s and wearied of a heavy-metal pep-pill diet. The music's emotional poverty had turned them



into clones of their parents: people who hated rock because it was "just noise."

Today the women are back in the record stores, and they have dragged rock's first generation in with them. Chanteuse pop is in style again, stronger than ever, in the work of some young and veteran smooth sisters. Warwick won a Grammy for Bacharach's *That's What Friends Are For*, and Aretha was back at No. 1 with a George Michael duet, *I Knew You Were Waiting (for Me)*. Streisand's return to Broadway—or rather to *The Broadway Album*—went platinum last year. New voices are enriching the old melodic sound too. From Britain, Sade translated her Afro-exotic features and bossa-nova ballads into a boffo LP. Anita Baker poured the ache of jazz into pop and sold a couple million copies of *Rapture*. All over the dial, female singers are anchoring distinctive personalities to the sound of soul on silk. But none

that 'Daddy' bit." Says Whitney: "He was Mom's support network while she was on tour. He changed diapers, cooked, did my hair and dressed me, all the while providing Mom with advice and answers."

Whitney's sweet inspiration was Emily ("Cissy") Drinkard Houston, now 53. Whitney calls her "my teacher, my friend, the lady in my life." John credits Cissy with teaching their daughter "how to talk, walk, stand, project, greet people. She took care of Whitney's teeth, got involved with how she dressed." Cissy was a strict and loving mom. If she thought Whitney needed a spanking, Whitney got one. "Cracking gum or sitting with your legs open were

stayed together for our sake. Finally they realized that the only way for them to stay friends was to split. It was strange not to have my father there, but he lives just ten minutes away. Besides, even if you're not together physically, the love never dies."

Dionne, who considers Whitney the "little girl I never had," says of the clan, "You don't get in unless we let you in." Whitney was always reluctant to let outsiders in. "I've always been a private person," she says. "In grammar school some of the girls had problems with me. My face was too light. My hair was too long. It was the black-consciousness period, and I felt really bad. I finally faced the fact that it isn't a crime not having friends. Being alone means you have fewer problems. When I decided to be a singer, my mother warned me I'd be alone a lot. Basically we all are. Loneliness comes with life."

At 17, Whitney completed her extended family when she met the "sister I never had." Robyn Crawford—tall, slim, severely handsome—was 19 then; they have been nearly inseparable ever since. Four years ago Robyn dropped out of Monmouth College, where she had played basketball on scholarship, and later became Whitney's personal assistant. They share a North Jersey flat with a view of Manhattan. Because of their easy intimacy, the tattle mill has ground out the story that they are lovers. Both women shrug off the rumor. Says Robyn: "I tell my family, 'You can hear anything on the streets, but if you don't



Cutting loose in the studio, and conferring with Producer Walden

have hit the plangent chord struck by John and Cissy Houston's little girl.

"With her looks and talent," says Warwick, "she had all the credentials. Her success was something that was supposed to happen. And like all of us in the family, Whitney was singing from the moment she came out," on Aug. 9, 1963, in Newark. After the Newark riots of 1967, the Houstons moved to a two-story house in East Orange, where Cissy still lived until this March. For the most part they were an ordinary family, except that Mom would occasionally hit the road to sing backups for Elvis, Aretha or Dionne. While Cissy toured with her group, the Sweet Inspirations, John, the group's manager, tended the three children. Whitney's half-brother Gary Garland, 28, sings duets and backup in her act; her brother Michael, 25, is the production manager on Whitney's tour.

Whitney was Daddy's girl, and the lure was mutual. "I used to give her flowers," says John, 66, who runs Whitney's three companies. "I helped her with term papers in high school—she'd call me on Tuesday for a paper due on Wednesday. She's always been great with



considered unacceptable," Whitney says, "and I'd better not come back from the yard with scratched knees." Cissy says Whitney "didn't date young. I didn't allow it. Period. But she did go through a rebellious teenage phase, mostly small stuff: staying out late, not washing the dishes. She was lazier than hell, stubborn and opinionated. When she was 16, I told her she wasn't going to make 17 because I was gonna kill her."

If the teenager felt rebellious, her mood may have reflected the tension between her parents. John moved out when Whitney was 15, though he and Cissy were never legally separated. "They'd laugh a lot," Whitney says. "And when times were hard, they fought, which taught me a lot about love and sacrifice. For a while they



hear it from me, it's not true." Whitney also alludes to family: "My mother taught me that when you stand in the truth and someone tells a lie about you, don't fight it. I'm not with any man. I'm not in love. People see Robyn with me, and they draw their own conclusions. Anyway, whose business is it if you're gay or like dogs? What others do shouldn't matter. Let people talk. It doesn't bother me because I know I'm not gay. I don't care."

What she cares about, has always cared about, is music. Gary Garland remembers the child Whitney, "dressed up in mother's gowns, down in the basement, singing her lungs out like she was in Madi-

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son Square Garden." At eleven, Whitney made her solo debut singing *Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah* at the local Baptist church. "I was scared to death," she recalls. "I was aware of people staring at me. No one moved. They seemed almost in a trance. I just stared at the clock in the center of the church. When I finished, everyone clapped and started crying. From then on, I knew God had blessed me."

Then began the musical education of Whitney Houston, courtesy of Cissy. "I taught her that you don't start loud," Cissy says, "because then you have no place to go. I taught her that songs tell a story, and you don't blare out a story. Control is the basis for singing: up, down, soft, sweet. And diction was very important." You can hear the fruit of Cissy's lessons even in a dance tune like *How Will I Know*. In the refrain "If he loves me, / If he loves me not," Whitney really punches that final *t*. No wonder: Mama was singing backup.

Her first industry angels were Eugene Harvey and Seymour Flics, then concert promoters, now Whitney's zealous managers and jealous protectors. In 1981 the team devised a game plan: they would develop acting and modeling as adjuncts to the music. Soon Whitney was doing a Canada Dry commercial and TV's *Silver Spoons* and *Gimme a Break*. She had already been cutting classes at her private Catholic girls' school to model for the Click agency. She later switched to Wilhelmina and appeared in *Glamour* and *Vogue*. Meanwhile she was sharing club dates with Cissy. Finally, at 18, she was ready for the record business.

And Clive Davis was ready for Whitney. Earlier, he had helped launch the careers of Janis Joplin, Barry Manilow and Billy Joel. Now he would steer Whitney Houston to middle-of-the-road music. Gerry Griffith, then Arista's A.-and-R. chief, had recommended Whitney to Davis and set up an audition. "Clive sat there poker-faced," recalls Flics. "He said thank you and left. The next day we got an enthusiastic offer." In 1983 Arista signed her, with a "key man" clause: if Davis leaves the company, Whitney can go with him.

It took a year and a half for Griffith and Davis to amass suitable songs for the album. Even after elaborate showcases in New York and Los Angeles, many producers turned down the chance to work with her. Finally the songwriter-producer Kashif offered to produce *You Give Good Love*. Jermaine Jackson, who had emerged from the shadow of Brother Michael, produced three songs. Walden came in to revise and then produce *How Will I Know*.

And Michael Masser covered the pop side of the tracks, producing four of his own compositions, including *Saving All My Love* and *Greatest Love*. Says Davis: "Our main criterion in picking each song was 'Will it be a hit?'" The album, budgeted at \$200,000, finally cost almost \$400,000.

The industry rule is to introduce an album with an up-tempo song. Davis took a risk by releasing two ballads as Houston's first singles. "We wanted *You Give Good Love* to solidify the black base," he says. "To our surprise, it went to No. 1 on the R.-and-B. charts and No. 3 pop. Then *Saving All My Love* hit No. 1 R. and B. and No. 1 pop. It's ironic, but Top 40 stations give more exposure to ballads by certain black artists than to those by most whites. Whit-

underlines Houston's chameleon charm. In one scene she reprises her *Saving All My Love* role; in another, she does a Tina Turner shimmy; throughout, she bops till any other mortal would drop.

In March, between takes on this video, the star dragged on a few cigarettes, posed with co-workers for just one more picture and, in a precious spare moment, perched on a stool and zoned out. As a professional model for a third of her life, Houston is used to being stared at, pampered, ordered about, tortured by beauticians' caresses. She doesn't seem to mind; she knows the only eye that matters is the unblinking one with the red light. "From the beginning," she says, "the camera and I were great friends. I know the eye of the camera is on me—eye to eye. It loves me, and I love it."

Perhaps this cool lover will entice her onto the big screen. There is talk of film work—maybe an adaptation of Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*, maybe a movie version of *Dreamgirls*. Meanwhile, her family will keep Whitney well protected. Her brothers run interference for her on tour; Robyn offers support and palship; John promotes and shields the family star. Still, Dad must wonder when the cocoon becomes a cage. Last year, after a concert in London, Whitney joined the crew at the local Hippodrome. "I was nervous," he recalls. "At one point I spotted her on the dance floor. 'Guess what, Daddy,' she said, 'I've been dancing!'" And she proceeded to dance until 4 in the morning. I almost cried, realizing that for three years she hadn't had

the chance to act like a teenager."

So here she stands—her carriage immaculate, of course—poised for the future. It should be no surprise to her, so meticulous are her Svengalis' strategies. Houston denies she is corseted by the evening gowns, the narrow gauge of her songs or the charges of her advisers' puppeteering. "I was the primary mover of my career. I told my people to give me a plan and I'd follow," she says. "And it worked. I traveled and smiled, and it worked."

Whitney Houston could go Hollywood or even Vegas, become a legend or a lounge act. But for now she is happy to savor the triumph. "I like being a woman," she says, "even in a man's world. After all, men can't wear dresses, but we can wear the pants." If she dares, professionally, to wear the pants—if her song selection grows with her technique, if she rises to the challenges her voice can already meet—she may soon hear the sweetest accolade. "Whitney Houston? Great singer! Oh, you mean she's pretty too?"

—By Richard Corliss. Reported by Elizabeth L. Bland and Elaine Dutka/New York



With her parents Cissy and John in Cissy's New Jersey kitchen

"Even if you're not together physically, the love never dies."

ney is helping to maintain the ballad tradition." The third single, *How Will I Know*, brought her to the teens and to MTV, which black artists have traditionally found tough to crack. And *Greatest Love* became Whitney's top-selling single. Says Davis: "It put the album in a totally different category."

Meanwhile, her movers and shapers were working overtime to fix the Whitney magic in her music videos. The first video, *You Give Good Love*, tells the story of a romance with a cameraman—and, more tellingly, with his adoring camera. In *Saving All My Love*, she is a beaming All-American girl shadowed by her secret lover's wife. In *Greatest Love*, Whitney dazzles in rehearsal rags and in a sequined evening gown that hangs elegantly from the world's creamiest shoulders. For *How Will I Know*, she wears just a yard or so of slink swank but still upstages the mod-art gashes of color and moves like the cuddliest disco dervish. The new video for *I Wanna Dance with Somebody* (directed, like *How Will I Know*, by Brian Grant)